

Strategic Marketing Planning And Phenomenology; Challenging The Dominant Paradigm

This paper contends that the conventional rational model of strategic marketing planning is flawed. It is argued that the latter leads to the subsumption of individual perceptions of marketing reality within universal systemic based theories, which are unable to take account of the subjective and discontinuous worlds of marketing managers. It is proposed that in order to better understand marketing decision making in organisations, a phenomenological perspective be adopted. Further research, utilising the phenomenological interview, should aim to examine the local circumstances and practical reasoning used by marketing managers in their 'life worlds', as they go about making marketing decisions.

Strategic Marketing Planning; A Troubled Paradigm

An explicit assumption of much marketing scholarship (Goetsch 1994; Kotler 1997), is the taken for granted assumption of the universal applicability of the strategic marketing planning process. In much of the literature, the model of marketing planning that is presented is a very consistent one, applying to both large and small organisations (Brooksbank 1996). Decision making in organisations is seen as linear, using techniques that can be applied to any marketing situation, irrespective of context. Writers subscribing to this approach include McDonald (1999) and Luck Ferrell and Lucas (1989). Ennis (1994 p 334) points out that,

"The key lesson to be drawn from this approach (and the others) is that without exception, they portray the planning process as sequential rational logical and predetermined. "

With regard to the planning process, it is generally accepted that the first formal steps are concerned with conducting a marketing audit and analysis, the latter involving the use of a range of planning tools. These tools are widely discussed in marketing textbooks and are generally regarded as being very relevant to business decision making (Kotler 1997). What then follows, is the setting of marketing objectives, and the formulation of action programmes, along with projected profit and loss positions and appropriate control mechanisms (McDonald 1999).

What are the implications of this thinking, with its law like generalisations? Firstly, it can be pointed out that all attempts at understanding organisations are based on theoretical frameworks. These are either explicit or implicit (Brown 1992). As a consequence, it is possible to characterise the above conception of marketing planning as being the logical outcome of systems theory. Within the systems theory perspective, it is argued that we view the organisation not from the subjective perceptions of its members, but as an impersonal system of closely connected parts, each functioning autonomously to meet specific objective goals Parsons (1950; Morgan 1986). In order for the organisation to survive, marketing planning becomes a system imperative (Saker and Speed 1992).

The trouble is that this perspective strips organisational analysis of people (Boden 1994), failing to grasp how organisations work in practice, as locally constructed and locally perceived phenomena. Despite this, systems theory is the dominant mode of theoretical and empirical representation used in the study of much marketing activity in business organisations. The system is seen to dominate over the subject and the business world is hence objectified (Thompson and McHugh 1990). As a consequence, the rational planning tools and techniques of strategic marketing are held over the

heads of organisational members, to such an extent that a major marketing figure has pointed out that this conventional view,

"assumes and relies on the existence of a world which is alien and unrecognisable to executives who actually have to manage marketing for real ." (Piercy 1997 pp3-4)

The truth is that we probably know more about the theory driven, rational planning techniques of marketing, than we do about how the latter is actually managed in practice by individuals. O'Driscoll and Murray (1998) note how little attention the marketing discipline pays to how decisions are made and implemented by practitioners. For them, there appears to be a major lack of interest in the workings of marketing management, as opposed to a preoccupation with the rational analytical domain of the discipline. In terms of this practice and theory dichotomy, Greenley (1987) Piercy (1997), Verhage and Warts (1988), all show that there is a considerable discrepancy between what marketing managers should be doing, according to the traditional model and what they are actually doing.

In an early study Greenley (1983), pointed out that he found only a small proportion of companies prepared a comprehensive marketing plan. It is possible to conclude from this that systems thinking and the attendant logic of linear planning models do not tell us very much about what really happens in an interpretative and discontinuous business world. The validity and relevance of analytical marketing tools used in decision making, like the Boston matrix and the product life cycle, are also being questioned, Mercer (1993), Morrison and Wensley (1991). If the research reveals that the conventional model and its tools and techniques are not being utilised, how then are marketing decisions being made and what are the implications of this situation? This paper seeks to confront this issue and the taken for granted systemic view of marketing that dominates theory development and research agendas. An alternative is offered up, a perspective on research into marketing that utilises phenomenology, an approach suggested by Kent (1986) and Robson and Rowe (1997).

Marketing Planning; Knowledge, Skills Orientation And Culture

A major problem with the traditional model of marketing planning, particularly from the viewpoint of those who advocate its use, is that there appear to be a range of cognitive barriers in existence that militate against its implementation. McDonald (1989) indicated from his research, that there is widespread confusion over terminology and procedures regarding marketing planning, allied to lack of knowledge and skills in this area. More recently Saunders, et al (1996 p229) conclude that "many managers do not even know the basic tools of marketing." Simkin (1996), notes that there is a relatively poor grasp of the marketing concept in many organisations. As a result of these findings, it is not very surprising that many observers believe that the use and understanding of marketing in industry is neither rigorous or well practised, a point noted by Pickton and Wright (1997).

Much of this 'deficit' based thinking assumes that there is one right way to do marketing, which is largely reflective of the approach of textbooks and consultants. Research into marketing is rooted firmly in the conventional paradigm and little interest is shown in the subjective understandings of marketing from practising managers points of view. The concern is that practitioners and aspiring practitioners understand and use the universal prescriptions of the current marketing faith, Kent (1998). Marketing meanings and actions do not just have to be about the latter however (Robson and Rowe 1997; Gummesson 1999), and it is argued here that research into the actual management of marketing is seriously neglected.

One of the key tenets of conventional marketing planning is the notion that a marketing orientation is indispensable to the success of the marketing plan and hence the modern business (Greenley and Oktemgil 1996), Wilson et al (1992). Various attempts have been made to develop objective overarching measures of what constitutes marketing orientation, for example Kohli and Jaworski (1990). Somehow these are supposed to capture the essence of marketing. What they are actually about is providing universal 'scientific' prescriptions of marketing. These can be seen as potentially invalidating other marketing meanings and actions, which do not conform to predetermined measures (Kent 1986,1998).

Saker and Speed (1992), point out that the adoption of a prescriptive approach to marketing planning may in fact destroy an efficient, but non planning culture. It can be argued then that success is not just about basing business activity on the 'one' right way. Robbin's (1991) in depth case study analysis of a family company, found that strategic marketing planning was absent, although the company was prospering. In consequence, more research should be aimed at understanding the grounded experiences of managers. A result of this change of direction might be that we may start to take possession of a knowledge base that will provide us with a clearer view of the lived reality of organisations and perhaps different examples of the practice of marketing.

For Piercy (1997), a key issue in strategic marketing planning is a behavioural one. The culture of the organisation is often ignored at the expense of concentrating on rational analytical techniques associated with marketing strategy. Here, corporate culture management styles and participation are relegated in importance by much of the conventional marketing orthodoxy. Piercy and Morgan's research (1994), identified behavioural problems like planning recalcitrance, planning uncertainty and inward orientation as militating against marketing planning implementation. Martin (1987) and Driver (1990) also stress the key role of the human element in terms of developing effective marketing planning systems.

Piercy (1997) suggests that an effective tool for achieving the implementation of the marketing plan is the adoption of internal marketing, where the organisation has to attempt to gain the commitment of its members to the proposals contained within the marketing strategy. This remedy for behavioural problems within marketing planning rests on the assumptions of systems theory however. A set of common values (Parsons 1950), work to maintain the stability of the whole organisation. In contrast, from a phenomenological perspective, it is argued that the achievement of one cultural perspective in an organisation is unlikely.

The assumption lying behind internal marketing is that the organisation operates as a co-operative social system. In practice this taken for granted, widely promulgated view of organisations is highly questionable (Silverman 1970). Not everyone in the organisation might be convinced about the overriding need for marketing orientation or a planned approach to marketing. Faced with these complexities, the universal model of the marketing planning process and its acceptance and use in the organisation can be seen as being fraught with difficulty. Here a phenomenological perspective, drawing on the insights of ethnomethodology, represents a useful research tool to aid understanding. Ethnomethodology emphasises an understanding of social action and the relativist and contingent aspects of organisational life, (Heritage 1984; Boden 1994). This suggests that the implementation of a marketing planning approach needs more than a simple culture change in the organisation to bring about marketing orientation.

Organisational Environments And The Adequacy Of Strategic Marketing Planning; Turbulence, Analytical Tools And Marketing Theory

In thinking about the application of decision making techniques to marketing, we can ask to what extent the traditional strategic marketing planning tools can cope with a turbulent and fragmented business environment. Webster (1992) notes that conventional notions of what constitutes the external environment has altered fundamentally. For example, those who were once competitors are now partners in strategic alliances. What this has led to is a blurring of boundaries between companies. New conceptions of marketing for Webster (1992), will focus on managing strategic partnerships globally. Positioned between vendors and end users, the organisation will be attempting to provide a superior level of value to customer groupings. What this suggests is a waning in importance of not only the conventional strategic marketing plan, but of the four Ps marketing model as well.

Stacy (1993) suggests that the planning process is not valid, because it is based on the faulty assumption that the environment can be predicted and that today's actions can be seen as part of that future. March (1988) points out that anticipating the future consequences of present decisions is often subject to significant error. Other criticisms derive from Weick (1995), who suggests that it is impossible to conceive of an objective environment. The latter is subjectively perceived and constructed by organisational members as individual acts. If managers do not notice or are not concerned by certain environmental events, then they will not be acted upon (Weick 1995). The latter also points out that the rational model assumes a mass of data is collected on the business environment. What occurs in reality, is that the information managers do receive and act on is actually very restricted. This is a result of the pragmatic acceptance of what is reasonable and achievable, by organisational members.

Brown (1995a) notes the nature of the current chaotic, turbulent world, which he believes renders traditional approaches to marketing redundant. It is argued that a massive fragmentation of markets is occurring, where segments are becoming smaller and less accessible and hence less amenable to planned approaches. Postmodernist marketing perspectives shed considerable doubt on the continued veracity of marketing's traditional scientific model of analysis, planning and control (Brown 1998). As examples, McMurdo (1993) and King (1994) note the rise of a new individualism, making buying behaviour unpredictable and planning difficult. Marsden and Littler (1998) point out that consumer identities are constantly in flux in today's society, making conventional approaches to segmentation and positioning difficult. Gummesson (1999) points out that the present complex environmental conditions have led to a state known as hypercompetition. In this situation, a successful organisation is one possessing superior ability to manoeuvre in a state of constant turmoil and disruption. Given these circumstances, it can be argued that continued use of conventional strategic marketing planning techniques become very questionable.

If the planning process itself is problematic, then so are some of the planning tools. Mercer (1993) suggests that the supposed universal applicability of the product life cycle is a myth. His research indicates that in most markets, the majority of the dominant brands have held their position for at least two decades and this is characteristic of continuity rather than evidence for life cycles. Brown (1995b) postulates that the tools of marketing research seen as important contributors to marketing planning, are being undermined by forms of media like films and novels. These he argues provide deep insights into contemporary consumer culture which extant market research tools fail to do.

Morrison and Wensley (1991) criticise the Boston matrix, a key conventional planning tool. It is an approach they argue which boxes in strategic thinking and is an outmoded orthodoxy. Additionally, the Boston matrix has in the past been criticised as being too narrow and difficult to work with (Wensley 1981). From an interpretivist perspective, the Boston matrix, like other marketing planning tools, may be rejected by managers if it does not seem to conform to local rationalities and local contexts. These latter factors are seen as being crucial determinants of strategy Weick (1995).

Strategic Marketing Planning And Organisational Decision Making

It can be suggested that the empirical process of making marketing decisions in organisations is significantly different from the traditional model of strategic planning. Critics of this approach include Wrapp (1984), who points out that managers muddle with a purpose in the stream of operating problems and Mintzberg (1994), who suggests that strategy is emergent, being created out of force of circumstance. For Piercy and Giles (1989), the essential problem is that conventional approaches assume that real planning actually follows such an orderly and rational sequence of goal setting, analysis and decision making.

"The apparent logical sequence of activities in strategic marketing planning which is popularly portrayed by textbooks and consultants is a gross simplification of organisational realities." (Piercy and Giles 1989 p19)

This perspective is partly reflected in the work of Lancaster and Waddelow (1998). Based on empirical research into the process of marketing planning, they identified significant process barriers to its successful implementation. The marketing managers who were interviewed in the study felt that the traditional approach was too cumbersome and hence consequently ineffective in practice. The research shows that marketing managers inhabit a detailed, complex world and that attempts to drive the strategic marketing planning process from the standard textbook approach created a gap between theory and practice. In both these cases, the suggestion is not that planning be eradicated from marketing managers agendas, but that it is located and modified in the context of their own learnt experiences. Support for this can be found in the ideographic and intuitive approach to marketing advocated by Gummesson (1987), where each marketing situation has to be seen in its own right. A learning organisation will not base future actions on a general theory which is clearly so questionable in practice.

A key issue for Mintzberg (1973), is the way in which managers carry out their work routines. His primary conclusion is that managers work is fragmented and characterised by brief encounters, with the emphasis on verbal interaction. Much less time is spent on the production and execution of plans than is suggested by the rational planning model. As Boden (1994) points out, the main activity of managers in organisations is not planning, but talking. Managers,

"*TALK* their way to solutions, *TALK* themselves into working agreements, *TALK* their coalitions into existence *TALK* their organisational agendas (Boden 1994 p52).

For Weick (1995) the sense that managers make of their world is not rooted in strategic planning models, but in reflexivity. Members of organisations constantly look at particular activities and situations in terms of what has previously occurred. Strategy becomes observed patterns in past decision behaviour and is not a future constructed now and then implemented. Furthermore, managers sense making is always on going and the effects of action cannot be predicted, but has to

be dealt with intuitively. Sense making is also social, in that decisions must be made in the context of others. Talk becomes the work as strategy adapts and unfolds in the context of the micro political environment of organisations (Hendry 1995). A number of other studies also suggest that the traditional rational marketing planning model is not the basis on which decisions are made. Greenley (1987) examined the current level of knowledge about the actual planning of marketing as practised by organisations. His research showed that of the one hundred and twenty firms examined, only a quarter of these had plans that could be considered to be comparable and adequate when looked at along side the prescriptive literature.

Marketing Planning; A Phenomenological Perspective

What is being suggested is that the prescriptive marketing planning literature is laying down a model that does not appear to work very well in practice, acting as a major constraining influence on research into marketing Waterschoot and Bulte (1992), Brownlie and Saren (1992). Furthermore, the traditional approach to marketing planning seems to assume a functionally driven predetermination to the activities of marketing managers. Individual action and meaning is consistently subsumed within the systems theory paradigm, see Dixon and Wilkinson (1989), for an example of this approach. This leads to a situation where,

"social actors are rarely glimpsed and are almost always presented as highly controlled by the collectivities of which they are seemingly an unwitting part." (Boden 1994, p29)

It can be argued that research into marketing planning activity is failing as well, because we are not learning enough about the grounded experiences and perceptions of managers, who have to manage marketing for real. Some of the studies discussed here, use primarily a quantitative, questionnaire based methodology. Examples being Greenley (1983), Verhage and Waarts (1988), Greenley and Bayus (1993), Piercy and Morgan (1994). Zinkham and Pereira (1994) suggest that there is an over reliance on this quantitative approach to the study of marketing planning.

The issue is that practising managers probably have different perceptions of marketing to those espoused by advocates of the traditional model. In depth perceptions, motives and meanings cannot be revealed through the use of structured or semi structured questionnaires alone (May 1997). The latter can only illustrate whether or not marketing managers do, or do not, use the traditional planning tools. The research by Greenley and Bayus (1993) is a case in point. Their study provides little information about the practices involved in making marketing decisions. This is in spite of the fact that some of these have probably resulted in success for the companies concerned.

Instead, what is needed is a way of exploring the subjective worlds of marketing managers, in order to uncover the realities of marketing for them. As Kent (1986) points out, an approach to this is,

"one developed by sociologists which emphasises that individuals as they interact with others in their everyday lives construct meanings which for them represents the world." Kent (1986.p 150)

Kent argues for more research into marketing to be located in individual perceptions of reality. These views are representative of a phenomenological framework Schutz (1972). Phenomenological investigation is influenced by ethnography, a qualitative methodology, which seeks an understanding of the cultures and actions of people in organisations (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). A phenomenological perspective treats social and organisational reality as

constructs of meaning. The self is seen as existential, with organisations made up of people having individual definitions of their situation (Silverman 1970).

This phenomenological approach is becoming more widely utilised in consumer behaviour studies, see Thompson et al (1989; Marsden and Littler 1998). In the area of marketing management research it yet to be established. There is a need to look at the experiential soft truths held by marketing managers in order to understand the contingent and on going practices of everyday life that surround them in their organisations. This may bring into sharp focus issues related to the validity of what stands as contemporary marketing knowledge. The latter is perhaps less immutable than a number of marketing authorities may think. Brownlie and Saren (1995 pp621-622) point out that,

"Marketing knowledge is not a fixed set of irrefutable beliefs, but a body of provisional ideas which can be subjected to the scrutiny of analysis just as much as any data set."

For Robson and Rowe (1997), phenomenology would concentrate on marketers experiences of the world using an inductive methodology to establish what it is in both theoretical and practical terms. They suggest for example that in some industrial contexts marketing is most certainly selling. In the context of planning, we may find that the notion of strategy may take on several forms, all perhaps equally successful. In addition, managers may not infact relate at all to the linear rational analytical model of marketing. In the next section, the phenomenological approach to research is outlined, to include it's major assumptions and indicating how an inquiry into marketing planning could be carried out, using this approach.

Concepts And Processes In Phenomenological Research

Phenomenology emerged out of a developing discontent with a philosophy of science based on an account of measurable material things, rather than taking into account the experiencing person and the connections between human consciousness and objects existing in the natural world. What is said to possess objective reality exists only through representation in the mind (Husserl 1931). In phenomenology, perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge and is a source which cannot be doubted (Moustakas 1994). The object of a conscious act or experience is inseparable from the meaning attached to it. Experience is then intentional and meaning is at the heart of phenomenological understanding. Phenomenology tries to understand the way a person lives, creates and relates to the world This 'life world' (Kvale 1996 p54) is the world as it is encountered and given in immediate experience, independent of and prior to explanation.

Phenomenology describes what is perceived, sensed and known in ones immediate awareness and experience. What is utilised by the researcher is only the data that is available to consciousness and the development of an understanding of the totality of the experience (Moustakas 1994). The phenomenological approach involves an understanding of experience in order to obtain comprehensive description, that provides the basis for a reflective structural analysis. The latter is usually obtained through the open ended interview, which is a first persons report of life experiences (Miles and Huberman 1994; Marshall and Rossman 1999).

The purpose of the interview is to describe and understand the central themes that those being researched experience (Kvale 1996). Knowledge is acquired through a process of social interaction, dependent on how interviewee and interviewer respond to each other in a subjective context. The focus of the research interview is on descriptions that depict the varieties and differences of a

particular phenomenon rather than arriving at fixed categorisations (Giorgi 1992). Marshall and Rossman (1999), point out that the purpose of the phenomenological interview is to describe the actual meanings of a concept for whoever is being researched. This form of interviewing permits a focus on the individuals' life world and the deep lived meanings that events have for people.

In the research process a key concept is phenomenological reduction (Hycner 1985) which calls for the suspension of judgements. This can be pictured as bracketing, where foreknowledge and common sense about the phenomena being researched is set apart from an understanding of that which is being described and explained. The focus of the research is set in brackets and everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic. Rather than having ready made categories for analysis, the process of phenomenological reduction indicates that a deliberate openness should be fostered facilitating receptivity to new phenomena (Kvale 1996).

In terms of analysis, the process of imaginative variation and synthesis (Moustakas 1994) helps the researcher to seek possible meanings through the utilisation of imagination, by varying the frames of reference and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives. The process of synthesis should turn the structural descriptions into an understanding of the essences of the phenomena (Giorgi 1994). Although at the analysis stage phenomenology is inductive, like grounded theory, it rejects the coding and categorisation of data found in the analytical approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Categorisation of the content of qualitative data can have the effect of atomising meanings; the meaning of an act becomes objectified into a finished thing, a datum, which results in the reduction of the subjective dimension of understanding (Kvale 1976;1996).

A phenomenological research programme is advocated here, which should provide us with a description of the life world of marketing managers. From this, researchers would be able to extrapolate a synthesis of the meanings and essences the former hold about strategic marketing planning and marketing practice generally. Importantly, it has to be seen that each interview situation will construct reality in its own way. This shifts attention away from notions of one objective and measurable reality associated with marketing planning, an approach which is found in much of the traditional research in this area. For Garfinkel (1984), no master reality exists and each situation must be looked at in its own right. For the phenomenological researcher, this will involve uncovering the perceptions of marketing managers in environments subjectively and locally constructed.

Conclusion; Rejecting Law Like Prescriptions; The Grounding Of Marketing Knowledge In Managers Life Worlds

Within a phenomenological perspective, reality is not a single external world amenable to manipulation and control by a set of objective analytical marketing tools, as suggested by Kotler (1997). Instead, marketing reality is made sense of by its adherents in the organisation. The role of the researcher then is to try and understand these actors' interpretative devices, the latter providing the background to action. Significant to this inquiry is the problematic nature of the everyday world (Heritage 1984). We can ask in what ways do marketing managers perceive, justify and attribute meaning to the courses of action that they pursue? In practice, we actually have little real understanding of the constructs and actions that lead to the making of marketing decisions, outside of the dominant rational model. It is argued that what is not needed is further quantitative surveys, seeking to show whether managers do, or do not, use tools like the Boston matrix.

It is postulated that the in depth phenomenological interview will reveal that the Kotlerian model of marketing as a rational planning and decision making process is simply not applicable in its current form, to many managers ways of thinking. Instead, it is argued that marketing will be found to be subjective, interpretative and constituted by a diverse range of realities and it is the implications of these for future marketing practice that could prove to be of enormous interest. The traditional systems based perspective, by implication, assumes that there are universal laws of marketing planning which are always appropriate and scientific in nature (Anderson 1983). It is argued that a phenomenologically based research perspective can bring the individual back into marketing. The argument here is that any attempt at understanding marketing reality, must be grounded in the meanings actors attach to their experiences, and not in the abstract and dehumanised demands of empirically questionable strategic planning systems.

Gummeson (1999) suggests that as part of the rethinking of marketing, organisations incorporate into their strategic processes the knowledge relationship. This does not just imply a reliance on gaining information from the external environment, but on sharing knowledge internally through a dialogue involving organisational members, where what one or two or more have learnt and created, can be taught to others. Phenomenological research can aid this agenda, by uncovering new and workable ways of doing marketing, based on an understanding of managers life worlds. As a consequence, we will not just have learning organisations (Senge 1993), but also to echo Gummeson (1999), teaching organisations as well. Finally, it may possibly be time, as we enter the millennium, for marketing to readjust and reinvent its theoretical structures and practices, in the context of the postmodern world it now inhabits.

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